



Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi Chin: An Extraordinary Life

By: **Phoebe Ann Pollitt** and David Yamaguchi

Abstract

A brief bio of Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi, who was one of about 85 Japanese American registered nurses to be forced into Relocation Centers across the country (U.S.A.).

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The shades to all of the train cars were pulled down, to block the passengers' views of what was happening outside, and where the train would be going. Outside, along all paths leading to the train, parked along Alaskan Way on the Seattle waterfront, there were sentries armed with rifles everywhere, watching the movements of the passengers heading toward the cars in a long line. Yet the passengers did not appear dangerous. For they included old men, young mothers with babes in arms; young boys, with all capable of carrying suitcases. The general public was kept back. They gawked from the passenger overpass. Black porters waited beside the cars in white jackets. But probably most curious of all was a small group of three women, two middleaged Caucasian ones, who said their goodbyes and good wishes to the young Asian one, before she too stepped away from her party to join the line of passengers en route for the train. Unlike the others, beneath her jacket which protected her from the March cold, she wore a uniform. It was a white nurse's uniform, complete with a cap. She was a college-educated registered nurse, who had volunteered for the assignment. The ink on her diploma, framed and in her handbag, was barely dry. It had just been handed to her, three months early, by two of her nursing instructors. She boarded the train, walked down the aisle, saying hello and Ohayo gozaimasu [good morning] to those she passed. As those new to their jobs do, whatever her inward doubts, the young nurse tried to convey to her charges a sense of confidence, that she knew her job and was up to the task. The date was March 30, 1942. There were 227 Asian American passengers on board, plus the Caucasian army sentries, and train crew. The young nurse's first responsibility would be to see that all arrived safely at their unknown destination.

Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi was born June 29, 1920 to Tadashi Yamaguchi (Father) and Misao Ikebata (Mother) in Bellevue, Washington. She was the middle of six children; two older sisters stayed in Japan when the family immigrated to the United States, and the oldest of four siblings who were born and raised in Washington state. They all attended the local public schools. Natsuko graduated from Garfield High School in 1937 where she was an honor roll student and worked on the school newspaper.

Before World War II, few Asian American women earned nursing credentials, and even fewer graduated from college programs with the four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. There were two reasons for this. The first was demography. As comparatively recent immigrant groups, by 1940 the U.S.-born children of Chinese and Japanese families were just reaching college age. The second was racist policies limiting Asian American enrollment in schools and colleges. However, Natsuko was determined to become a professional nurse so she gained admittance to Seattle College in the fall of 1938—through the intercession of the Yamaguchi family doctor, who had connections there—and began her nursing studies. It seems likely that it was on the largely Caucasian Catholic campus that Natsuko was given her

western name, “Catherine”—probably by the nuns who taught the nursing students. None of Natusko’s siblings had western names.

On December 7, 1941, after the Japanese military attacked U.S. naval bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the United States entered World War II and declared war with Germany, Italy, and Japan. Two months later, on February 19, 1942, during the spring semester of Chin’s senior year, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, mandating the removal of “resident enemy aliens.” Within a few months, approximately 110,000 Japanese citizens and residents were forcibly evacuated from their homes on the west coast and “relocated” into ten concentration camps from Idaho to Arkansas. Chin’s family was, of course, removed from Bellevue along with the thousands of others.

Chin’s nephew, David Yamaguchi, reports that “In her final year [of nursing school] in 1941–1942, Natsuko’s days involved hands-on training and rooming at Providence Hospital.” Japanese American people living on Bainbridge Island in Washington state were the first to be evacuated. They were sent to the Manzanar Relocation Center in central California. The Yamaguchi family, including Natsuko, had relatives and friends on Bainbridge Island. When the Bainbridge Island evacuees were forced off the island in late March 1942, “Natsuko boarded the train, and accompanied the Bainbridge people to Manzanar as a nurse ... those sweet SU [Seattle University] nuns must have given Natsuko her June diploma early. I would imagine them handing it to her saying ‘Here, you’re going to need this,’” says David.

Chin’s graduation date from Seattle College was March 1942. She was one of about 85 Japanese American registered nurses to be forced into Relocation Centers across the country. However, Natsuko’s entering Manzanar stands apart from those of all the other Nisei (U.S.-born second-generation Japanese Americans) nurses, for she alone entered the camps voluntarily, to accompany the Bainbridge Islanders, two months before her own family would be required to show up at the gates of Camp Harmony/Puyallup Assembly Center in Seattle.